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BACKGROUND

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RWANDA/BURUNDI REGIONAL REFUGEE CONFERENCE

Purpose of Conference: To focus on the diplomatic and practical steps needed to permit large-scale repatriation of Rwandan and Burundi refugees while also providing an opportunity for regional players to discuss the political context (e.g., the need to avoid return to open warfare). This conference would be distinct from any additional regional summits which have been suggested.

Specific Desired Outcomes: We would like to see concrete, pragmatic plans adopted for addressing sticky issues such as camp security, land tenure questions, confidence-building mechanisms, and indemnification.

Chairs: UNHCR and the OAU have agreed to co-chair.

Timing: We want to see a plenary conference held in January with a preparatory conference to be held before the end of the calendar year.

Venue: The Government of Burundi has agreed to host the conference in Bujumbura. We support this as a means of underscoring support for the GRB and helping to stabilize the tenuous situation there.

Participants: We have suggested to UNHCR and the OAU that the

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prepcon involve working level officials from the countries in the region who have previously participated in similar discussions (Rwanda, Burundi, Zaire, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya and Zambia); interested donors from the friends of Rwanda operational support group (US, UK, Germany, France, Belgium, Japan, Tunisia, Canada, Netherlands, the EU, and Sweden); the SYG's Special Envoy Dillon, the SRSK Khan, UNHCR, DHA, and other UN departments/agencies as the UN Secretariat determines; and the OAU. The plenary session would then involve ministerial level officials.

Resources: As neither UNHCR nor the OAU has budgeted for such a conference(s), voluntary contributions will need to be made by donors to support the effort. No cost estimates have yet been made available.

Current State of Planning: It now appears that the OAU is thinking that there will be two separate conferences stemming from two resolutions--the one passed at the OAU Summit in June and the other one passed at UNGA. The OAU conference would focus on refugees and take place in March, whereas the UN conference, which would cover refugees and political issues would take place sometime in June. UNHCR has asked the UN Secretariat and the OAU to sort this out as it believes (and we agree) that only one refugee conference is needed. Salim Salim reportedly considers the conference a high priority and is

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pushing his staff to move preparations forward. The OAU has established a preparatory committee to organize the conference, but it does not appear to have met yet. An aide memoire was prepared which outlines a series of objectives, documentation, participation and financial aspects. We have suggested that the objectives focus on specifics such as protecting refugees, addressing root causes, and ensuring safety of returnees. We also suggested that the OAU's list of participants was overly ambitious.

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- The USG attaches great importance to the proposed Rwanda/Burundi Regional Refugee Conference. We see this as an important opportunity to focus on the diplomatic and practical steps needed to permit large-scale repatriation of Rwandan and Burundi refugees as well as an opportunity for regional players to discuss the inescapable political context.
- We are pushing the OAU and UNHCR to have a preparatory conference at the technical level by the end of the year and a plenary conference at the ministerial level in January. Bujumbura should be the venue.
- We want to avoid a conference which consists of a series of speeches which describe current events, the problem of refugees on asylum countries, and the need for additional resources.
- Rather, we envision the outcome of the conferences to be a declaration of a plan of action which encompasses pragmatic steps to be taken for addressing difficult issues such as camp security, land tenure questions, confidence-building mechanisms, and indemnification.
- We need to urge the OAU and the countries involved to craft the conference in such a way that it remains focused on realistic solutions to regional refugee problems.

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SERWBY 238

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